BATTLE OF THE GREAT CANE BRAKE: AN ALL-AMERICAN SKIRMISH ON THE REEDY

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The year 1775 was an exciting one in the Thirteen Colonies. The battles of Lexington, Concord and Breed's Hill had been fought in Massachusetts and Boston was besieged by the colonists. In South Carolina, blood had not been shed but the political scene was quite volatile. A rather haughty Royal Governor had arrived who managed to alienate most of the local authorities who were inclining toward greater colonial autonomy and possibly independence; in about three months, the new Governor took refuge on a British warship in Charlestown harbor. The "gentlemen" of Charlestown were concerned that the settlers of the Backcountry were at best lukewarm toward the patriot cause. A mission was sent into the Backcountry which was unable to bring in many converts to the cause. Diplomacy having failed, the gentlemen resorted to the use of force to bring the settlers in line. On December 22, 1775, this campaign culminated in a brief and almost bloodless engagement on the banks of the Reedy River in present-day Greenville County which kept the Backcountry quiet for four years.

Like many other colonists, South Carolinians were ambivalent about their relationship with the mother country. South Carolinians, in particular, were close to England since its planters and merchants enjoyed great prosperity under British protection; many of the upper crust spent time in London and their children were educated there.

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Nevertheless, the gentry of the colony resented the Crown's control over the colony's internal affairs, especially the appointment of Royal officials, including judges, with little or no understanding of the way things were done here. These men were described by a 19th century historian as having "an overweening pride of ancestry; a haughty defiance of all restraints not self-imposed; an innate hankering after power, and a self opinionated assumption of supremacy." A later historian had a kinder view of the Charlestown aristocracy: "Proud, cultivated, sensitive, they could not tolerate interference to accept the inferior status imposed on them by the British government."

Whatever their motivation, men like Henry Laurens, William Henry Drayton, Christopher Gadsden and John Rutledge decided to take action. In January 1775, they created the Provincial Congress as a governing body in competition with the Royal Assembly. The Congress called for the raising and equipping of three regiments for the protection of the colony. A Provincial Association was created as a form of loyalty oath. Subscribers to the Association pledged themselves to the freedom and safety of their province and those who refused to sign were declared to be enemies. The colonists now faced the dilemma of choosing sides.

The patriot cause was not adhered to by a majority of the colonists in the summer of 1775, even in Charlestown. A number of the colonists felt a strong allegiance to the Crown and had no desire for independence or war. A conciliatory approach by the British government would have gone a long way to keeping South Carolina safe for the Crown. Instead, the Crown sent Lord William Campbell as South Carolina's last Royal Governor. Although married to a local girl, Sarah Izard, Governor Campbell was aloof and contemptuous of the proud Rice Kings who were his natural allies. In his first and only address to the Assembly, he refused to discuss any grievances. Instead, he stated to this body (composed mainly of men sympathetic to Britain) that "I warn you of the danger you are in; the violent measures adopted cannot fail of drawing down inevitable ruin on this flourishing colony."

In response, the Council of Safety, consisting of 17 men led by Henry Laurens, was constituted.

Both sides spent the summer of 1775 competing for the allegiance of the inhabitants of the Backcountry, both colonists and Indians. The British sent emissaries to the Indians and supplied them with arms and ammunition. The Indians were told that "if they would attach themselves to the king's interest, they should find plenty pouring in among them." An Indian agent had reservations about this strategy: "I pray God there may be no intention to involve the Cherokees in the dispute: for should the Indians be prompted to take up the hatchet against the colonies, they could not be restrained from committing the most inhuman barbarities on women and children."

The patriots concentrated their efforts on winning the hearts and minds of the settlers in the area between the Saluda and Broad Rivers as well as the Saxe Gotha Township. These were relative newcomers who had little in common with the aristocratic folks in Charlestown. Many were Germans who were fearful of eviction from their land grants if they supported the patriots. These settlers mainly wanted no part of the dispute and remained neutral. The biggest problem was with those of Scots-Irish descent.

In an effort to convince these settlers of the righteousness of the patriot cause, the Council of Safety sent a mission on a speaking trip through the Backcountry consisting of William Henry Drayton, the Reverend William Tennent, Colonel Richard Richardson, Joseph Kershaw and several others. A number of meetings were held, some of a violent nature, but very few signed the Association which meant one favored the patriots. Drayton was countered in this mission by influential Loyalists such as Thomas Fletchall, a prominent magistrate and militia leader on Fairforest Creek (who weighed 280 pounds and was described as "a grand and mighty nabob"), Moses Kirkland, Robert Cunningham and Patrick Cunningham. Colonel Thomson (of whom we shall hear more anon) thought that extreme measures were appropriate: "If they were Cherokee Chiefs or Leaders I would venture

to lose my life or Send their Scalps to the Council of Safety." Drayton went the route of not-so-gentle persuasion. Drayton reports that he spent three hours cajoling Fletchall with no success. Fletchall stated that "he would never take up arms against the King, or his countrymen; and that the proceedings of the Congress at Philadelphia were impolitic, disrespectful, and irritating to the King."

The patriots even enlisted the highly-respected Reverend Richard Furman in support of the cause. Writing from the High Hills of Santee to the "Residents Between the Broad and Saluda Rivers," this divine set out the grievances of the colonists to the high-handed measures of Great Britain (in similar fashion as the Declaration of Independence) and then went on to warn these recalcitrants of the consequences of resistance: "Consider how, if [the patriots] get to the height of exasperation, not only your blood may be shed, but also your innocent wives, and children may share in the unhappy fate." It is interesting to note that the Reverend Furman was very concerned that the British might establish a "Popish" religion in America.

Meanwhile, back in Charlestown, the Congress learned of Governor Campbell's attempts to incite the Indians against the patriots. After Congress almost had him arrested, the governor found his quarters at 34 Meeting Street to be too confining and took refuge on HMS *Tamar* in the harbor. As a result, Lord William] was neutralized as a leader of the loyalists in the Colony.

Drayton had been authorized to use force if reason failed. In September, Drayton called up about 1,000 patriot militiamen. Apparently, Congress had instituted a draft and met with some resistance—not everybody wanted to leave their loved ones to fight their neighbors. Drayton was faced by about 1,200 loyalists under Colonel Fletchall. He invited Fletchall to meet him at Ninety-Six Courthouse which, on September 16, resulted in the first Treaty of Ninety-Six. The loyalists agreed not to support British troops and the patriots agreed to punish anyone who molested the loyalists. The Cunninghams and other loyalist leaders repudiated the agreement and

one went so far as to report to the Governor that Fletchall "had such frequent Recourse to the Bottle as to soon render himself *non compos*." Nevertheless, this little stroke of diplomacy calmed things down for a month or so. Drayton returned to Charlestown where he was elected President of the Provincial Congress.

This peaceful state of affairs ended abruptly with the arrest of Robert Cunningham for "seditious language." Apparently, Robert's speeches had been too effective in opposing the patriot cause. He was brought to Charlestown where he admitted his remarks but denied that he meant any offense. Drayton had him locked up which was part of the Congress' plan to separate the loyalists from their leaders. The plan backfired because the loyalists took to the field in response to this outrage. After failing to rescue his brother, Patrick Cunningham and a number of followers hijacked a wagon of powder and lead being transported by some rangers from Fort Augusta to friendly Cherokees for trading purposes. The loyalists attempted to use this incident to inflame the settlers against the patriots by claiming that the patriots were using the powder and lead to arm the Cherokees to attack and massacre the loyalists. This baseless claim was supported by an affidavit from Greenville's own Richard Pearis who had gone over to the loyalists after being passed over for an appointment.

In a matter of days, both sides had mobilized their forces. The Provincial Congress authorized Colonel Richard Richardson, a prominent individual from the Congarees, to raise the militia to recover the ammunition, arrest the rebellious leaders and to prevent any more insurrections. This was quite an assignment for a 71-year old man. In the meantime, Major Andrew Williamson brought about 560 patriot militiamen to Ninety-Six where he erected a stockade that was then besieged by approximately 1,900 loyalists. In the three days' battle, the patriots lost one killed and 12 wounded while the loyalists suffered several killed and 20 wounded. Another treaty was arrived at whereby the loyalists agreed to withdraw north of the Saluda, the fort was to be

razed. both sides would submit their cases to their respective leaders in Charlestown and neither side would bother the other in the meantime.

Colonel Richardson and his men did not feel that they were bound by this agreement and he proceeded to suppress the loyalists, most of whom had gone home after the treaty of Ninety-Six. His force grew to 2,500 and eventually to 4,000 to 5,000 with the addition of militia from various districts, including the New Acquisition Territory (York) and Colonel Thomas' Spartan Regiment, and even from North Carolina. The main organized unit was the Third South Carolina Regiment of Rangers raised in Orangeburgh District and commanded by Colonel William "Danger" Thomson. Richardson's adjutant was Captain Thomas Sumter, an in-law of his, later known as the "Gamecock". Richardson continued the policy of isolating the loyalists from their leaders by issuing a proclamation on December 8, 1775 to the effect that:

> To satisfy public justice in the just punishment of all which crimes and offences, as far as the nature of the same will admit, I am now come into these parts, in the name and the behalf of the Colonies to demand of all the inhabitants, the delivery up of the bodies of all the principal offenders herein, together with the said ammunition and the full restitution for the ravages committed, and also the arms and ammunition of all the aiders and abettors of these robbers, murderers, and disturbers of the peace and good order aforesaid; and, in case of refusal or neglect, for the space of five days, I shall be under a necessity of taking such steps as will be found disagreeable, but which I shall certainly put into execution for the public good.

Richardson's proclamation had the desired effect on many of the loyalists who offered little resistance but who were "hovering about" with never more than 400 "assembled in arms." Obviously,

Colonel Richardson was in a position to back up his proclamation with force. He started out with 1500 men when he crossed the Congaree. On December 2, he was at Evan McLaurin's store, 15 miles from the Saluda, where his army grew to 2,500. He subsequently captured Colonel Fletchall (who was "unkennelled" from a large hollow sycamore), our founder Captain Richard Pearis and a number of other loyalist leaders who were sent to prison in Charlestown. Richardson's force, consisting of 4,000 to 5,000 men, stopped at Hollingsworth's Mill on Raborn's Creek which is a branch of the Reedy River; this was at the end of the roads in northwestern South Carolina. He reported to the Council of Safety that the sheer size of his army "has a good effect, strikes terror, and shows what can be done on occasion—we have been successful in disarming most of this unhappy people; they are coming in with fear and trembling, giving up their arms, with a sensible contrition for the errors they have been guilty of."

Patrick Cunningham was exempt from the amnesty part of the proclamation. He and his men, soon down to 200 in number, retreated from Richardson's oncoming and ever-growing army. The loyalists were on horseback and kept about 20 miles ahead of the patriots. They would not stand and fight (which was probably a sensible approach). According to Drayton, "at one time they would take heart, and threaten to stand and give battle, but, as soon as the army commenced to march upon them, cowardly councils and guilty consciences obliged them to turn and retreat."

Finally, the loyalists could retreat no more. About 130 of them, led by Patrick Cunningham, encamped on the banks of the Reedy River, near Fork Shoals, four miles inside the Indian Territory. This was at a place known as the "Great Cane Brake"—a high stand of bamboo was a sign of prosperity in those days. This "nest of seditic and turbulent spirits" had no entrenchments but may have been locat at an Indian trading post. The loyalists were hopeful that the Cheroke would help them out but the Indians had no quarrel with the patriots. When Colonel Richardson received word of this camp, he assembled

a volunteer detachment of some 1300 infantry and cavalry under the command of Colonel William Thomson; the unit also contained Colonels Polk and Rutherford of North Carolina and Major Andrew Williamson of Ninety-Six fame.

Setting out on the evening of December 21, the detachment marched over 23 miles to within sight of the loyalist camp. This was a remarkable achievement in itself; the column must have taken an Indian path through the woods along the banks of the Reedy. At dawn, the patriots fanned out for a surprise attack. Unfortunately, the loyalists were on the *qui vive* and the alarm was sounded before they were completely surrounded. Patrick Cunningham escaped bare-backed (some say bare-britches) on his horse shouting "every man shift for himself." The cordon of patriots closed in, firing as they went. The loyalists put up no resistance and quickly surrendered. One patriot, Major William Polk of Maury County, North Carolina, was wounded in the shoulder. Five or six loyalists were killed and about 130 taken as prisoners—several may have been hanged on a nearby oak tree that was still standing years later. Colonel Thomson is credited with preventing further bloodshed.

Then came the hard part of what is now called the "Snow Campaign." On December 23, 1775, a snow began that lasted over 30 hours leaving two feet on the ground. The North Carolinians headed north to home while some of the South Carolina units went to various parts of the state. Colonel Richardson and the main part of his command, including the Rangers, began the long walk back to the Congarees. The patriots suffered greatly on this march but it is not known if any perished. "Coming out as volunteers, suddenly, and without much preparation, they were thinly clad, and before the campaign was over, their shoes had worn out. They were without tents, and, for a week, in consequence of the snow, they never saw the earth, or set foot upon it, unless when they cleared away the incumbent ice, to find a place for sleep or to cook their scanty fare. A sleet storm which followed, completed their sufferings, and accompanied them

back to their camp upon the Congarees, with the liveliest memories of a campaign, in which their smallest perils were those which had been threatened by their enemies."

It is noteworthy that Colonel Richardson's force contained no units from Charlestown. The campaign was conducted by the Backcountry men who were regarded with contempt by the "gentlemen" of the Holy City. The campaign did cost the Provincial Congress the sum of 460,000 pounds, an exorbitant sum in 1775.

What became of the loyalists? The prisoners taken at the Great Cane Brake suffered through the long walk to Charlestown in the dead of winter. Most were released and joined the patriots. According to David Ramsay, a number of those averse to fighting went "over the mountains" to be let alone. A number of the disaffected found their way to Florida but returned in 1780 after Charlestown fell.

The success of the campaign, aside from the military aspect, was grounded in the restraint of Colonels Richardson and Thomson. Richardson reported to Henry Laurens: "The lenient measures have had a good effect . . . . On the reverse, had I burnt, plundered and destroyed and laid waste, seizing on private property, then thousands of women and children must have been left to perish—a thought shocking to humanity." Dr. David Duncan Wallace summed it up 160 years later:

> A spirited, suspicious people, animated by loyalty to their King, against whom in their remote homes they cherished no wrongs, resentful of unlawful attempts to control them, were convinced of the overwhelming power of the Provincial Congress, of the humanity of its officers and of the falsity of the charges that the Revolutionists planned to subject them to Indian massacre.

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